

Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities

Consider the way that Asa Bambir, Lynn Witherspoon, and Trina Adams explained gender presentation in New York's Black lesbian community to me:

ASA BAMBIR (AGE 34, EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT):

In New York I saw more of this butch-femme thing and I was a little floored by it, a little shocked, like why do people have to play these roles? . . . But at the same time I looked at it in awe, because there was a part of my childhood when I really liked wearing boyish clothes, but I never did. . . . So, I was very intrigued by it, and I think over the years I've just been allowing that to surface. I really do like wearing boyish clothes. . . . I was definitely drawn to women who were feminine looking, very feminine looking.

LYNN WITHERSPOON (AGE 33, CORPORATE ATTORNEY):

When I first started to come out . . . it was interesting, because I had this type that I was attracted to, and yet when I was going out I was always attracting the more butch-looking women. And I was like, "Oh, I'm carrying this purse," and all of these other things, you know, all these things you do in the straight community. So I had to change the way I dressed, and I stopped carrying a purse, and I was able to find women who I was more attracted to to go out with. When I first came out I was wearing makeup; I stopped wearing makeup.

TRINA ADAMS (AGE 32, HOTEL ASSOCIATE):

In most [Black lesbian] relationships there is one that is more feminine than the other. For some reason that is just the way it is. I've never seen two

aggressives together.¹ I've seen two feminine women living together, but one is always more aggressive. As you talk to them and you are around them more, you realize that one woman is more aggressive. I don't like the labels, but they exist. Because, I mean, we are just gay, and I don't know who started the labels, but it is what it is.

These excerpts show that there are various physical representations of gender in Black lesbian communities, and suggest that portrayals of gender are not arbitrary—rather, in some salient way they structure women's expectations for and within relationships. My respondents' comments imply that in the lesbian social worlds they know, feminine-looking women are attracted to and partner with women who are not as feminine in their physical style and mannerisms, and vice versa. Even when lesbians have a preference for a particular gendered display, they may not like to acknowledge the significance of categories and their meanings for their personal preferences. At least some women exhibit a contradiction between the significance of gender display for their private desires and their wish to downplay or dismiss the categorization of gender presentation among Black lesbians.

Gender presentation among lesbians is a fraught subject that has long been a topic of interest.² In the early 1990s, feminist scholars began to document what was framed as a “resurgence of gendered fashion” (Stein 1992, 434), or a revival of butch and femme presentations of self within lesbian communities.³ Whereas butch and femme styles had been understood prior to the 1970s as expressions of intensely personal experiences around sexual identity, these scholars interpreted gender display as a less serious form of sexual amusement. Categories of gender display were said to be more ambiguous than in past generations, and researchers saw more choice in the types of gender presentation lesbians created. Relative to previous eras, women were now thought to frivolously play on cultural representations of gender: “It's all a game,” they found, and gender display was no longer strongly linked to a personal identity or the structure of norms for a community (Faderman 1992; Weston 1993).⁴

Weston's and other's perspectives on contemporary gender display are actually consistent with 1970s lesbian-feminist interpretations of gender presentation that reduced the significance of those aspects of women's experience that related to maleness or masculinity, particularly masculine physical presentations in women. By labeling these presentations of self as “play” or “performance” rather than considering a more serious meaning of their representation and function within les-

bian social groups, scholars began to conclude that gender presentation no longer organized lesbian life in any concrete pattern (Eves 2004).

Theoretical challenges to this perspective began to emerge in the late 1990s. Butler (1999) problematized aspects of feminist theory that questioned the legitimacy of gendered behavior within any particular gender group. Halberstam's (1998) work on female masculinity began to concretely examine definitions of gender identity and changes in them through an exploration of race and gender in film. Blackman and Perry (1990) called attention to this debate between "lipstick lesbians," who create an edgy femininity to attract women rather than men, bringing greater attention to the sexuality in lesbian identity and "revolutionary lesbian feminists" who continue to eschew feminine presentations of gender. Nevertheless, the field continues to lack empirical analyses of whether and how gender presentation relates to other identities, such as those connected to race, that structure relationships in contemporary lesbian communities.⁵

The existence and meanings of gender presentation for Black lesbians in New York at the start of the twenty-first century are critically examined in this chapter. The terms *physical presentation of gender*, *gender presentation*, and *gender display* are used interchangeably throughout this work following Judith Lorber's definition of "presentation of self" as "a certain kind of gendered norm through dress, cosmetics, adornments, and permanent and reversible body marks" (1994, 31). This gender display may be represented through clothing, physical markers, such as hairstyle, body language (e.g., way of walking or sitting), mannerisms (e.g., way of talking or gesturing), and other expressions of self. The chapter's first section defines three categories of gender display that I have found in Black lesbian communities: femme, gender-blender, and transgressive.

The second section considers the impact—or rather, the lack of impact—of 1970s lesbian-feminism on Black lesbians' presentations of gender. Whereas one influential legacy of 1970s lesbian-feminism has been White middle-class lesbians' rejection of the use of gendered physical presentation, and particularly lesbian butch/femme presentation, as a way of organizing relationships and lesbian community life, I find that many Black gay women are not influenced by this legacy.⁶ Instead, they have modified the older butch and femme identities into three fairly distinct categories of gender presentation. Women choose a style for the public and private performance of gender which, once formed, tends to remain consistent over time.

Context is essential to the way in which gender presentation is received. A woman walking down 125th Street in Harlem or Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn wearing an athletic jersey and baggy jeans will not be immediately identified as a gay just because of the way she is dressed, but when she steps into a convention center or nightclub filled with other lesbians, these same clothes will reveal her membership in a distinct gender display category. The categories of femme, gender-blender, and transgressive, in other words, have the most meaning when they are presented in a context in which Black lesbians are present; it is in this context that the subtleties that often accompany a femme or gender-blending presentation of self become clear. Black lesbians' gender presentation choices are influenced, moreover, by cultural norms dictated by race and class, which structure lesbian sexuality and the enactment of gay identity. New York contains many distinct, well-developed sexual communities, and women can become socialized into lesbian communities that are not explicitly based on specific feminist principles, which might be the case if the primary gay public social groups had a political focus.⁷ Many of these groups are segregated by race and ethnicity, moreover, facilitating the development of gay identity in racially homogeneous environments. As a result, being gay is not experienced as an identity in and of itself that creates social distance from one's racial group or that is associated with a particular political ideology. In New York, one can be gay and still remain connected to one's own ethnic and cultural groups.⁸

The women who participated in this study are actively engaged in the public social worlds of New York gay life, and the lesbian spaces they frequent are predominantly Black or contain significant numbers of Black people in them. Sixty-one percent of the women I surveyed go to a lesbian or gay bar or dance club at least once a month; 35 percent go less than once a month. Only 4 percent say they never go to lesbian or gay bars or dance clubs. The gay social spaces they frequent are predominantly racially integrated or mostly Black and Latina; just 5 percent spend time at bars and clubs that are predominantly White. The women I studied are entrenched in social networks that are racially diverse but that also have plenty of Black LGBT people in them. Seventy-two percent said at least half of their friends are Black, while 57 percent said most or all of their friends are Black. The survey also showed that when the Black lesbians in this study spend time with gay people, those people are usually racially similar. Seventy-four percent said at least half of their gay friends are Black, while 64 percent said most or all of their gay friends are Black. Just 7 percent said half or most of their gay friends are White.⁹

As the excerpts that open this chapter suggest, in the Black lesbian communities of New York, physical representations of gender indicated by clothing, hair, physical stance, the presence or absence of makeup, and various other symbols are extremely important markers of identification. An individual's style of clothing broadcasts to the community how she chooses to represent her race and gender, as well as the type of physical representation she is attracted to. The expression of gender presentation attempts to authentically capture other distinctions that characterize larger Black communities: style is used to represent not only gender but social class, ethnicity, culture, and finer group memberships.¹⁰ The modes of gender expression inform and shape social contexts and importantly organize intimate and other social relationships. It takes hard work to represent a particular raced, classed, and gendered sense of self that is deemed authentic by others in the racial and sexual communities that define the social worlds of New York's Black gay women.

In the latter sections of this chapter, I consider how gender presentation functions in Black lesbian communities today. First I show how complementarity in gender display grants lesbians the freedom to create a physical presentation of their sexual identity at the same time that it imposes restrictions on whom individuals can partner with. I then look at class differences in attitudes about nonfeminine or "transgressive" gender display. Middle-class lesbians avoid transgressive gender presentation because it interferes with their attempts to erect moral and symbolic boundaries that signify their class status and facilitate their assimilation into larger society. Working-class lesbians embrace nonfeminine gender display and use it as an act of resistance to social norms. Asserting a transgressive gender presentation is one way they express feelings of difference from larger society based on the multiple marginalized statuses they occupy. Race has important consequences for the expression of masculinity, and I consider how presentations of masculinity expressed in the Black female body relate to broader notions of hegemonic masculinity and feminist analyses of sexual autonomy. The chapter's conclusion offers four reasons for the persistence of distinct forms of gender presentation among Black lesbians at the start of the twenty-first century.

PHYSICAL PRESENTATIONS OF GENDER

I measured physical presentation of gender in three ways. First, I asked women who responded to the survey to rate their own physical attributes,

the physical attributes of their current mates, and the physical attributes of their ideal mates on a scale of one to ten, with one being very feminine and ten being very masculine. These categories represent physical style and mannerisms and are separate from items measuring personality traits and interaction styles (appendix B).¹¹ I also measured physical presentation of gender by asking a series of open-ended questions in the in-depth interviews about how the respondent perceives her own gender display, whether the type of person she is attracted to influences how she dresses, how she came to decide on a style that was comfortable for her, and how she feels about the labels that exist for different presentations of lesbian gender (see appendix C).

In addition, my fieldwork provided three years of observations of the interview and survey respondents as well as other Black lesbians in a variety of social contexts: restaurants, religious meetings, lesbian and straight bars and dance clubs, house parties and backyard barbecues, book clubs, and black-tie and other formal events. Seeing my respondents repeatedly in a variety of locales allowed me to get a clear sense of how they chose to represent their gender when they were in social settings with other gay people and when they were in predominantly heterosexual spaces. Observing unpartnered women in these settings also allowed me to see the physical presentations of gender of women they were attracted to or chose to date. Observing couples gave me a multidimensional picture of how each dressed relative to the other so I could see, for example, how someone who assigned herself a score of 2 (*very feminine* on the scale) looked next to her partner whom she assigned a score of 4 (*gender-blender*). I examined style in relation to that of a partner and in relation to the styles of other lesbians in the social environment.

I recoded the survey results to create three categories of gender display: “femmes” score between one and three, “gender-blenders” score between four and six, and “transgressives” score between seven and ten. The femme, gender-blender, and transgressive categories of gender presentation are classes of ascription and identification used not just by me as the researcher but by lesbian community members themselves, though the *terms* used by community members to describe these categories vary across age, class, and geographic region.

Femmes

About half of the respondents (48 percent) are femmes, or feminine women. When asked “How do you feel about labels like ‘femme’ or

‘aggressive’ or ‘butch?’” “Where do you think you would fit in if you had to choose a label?” and “What is it about your style of dress or personality that makes you answer in that way?” the women in this category referred to themselves as “femme,” “fem-looking,” “femme, sort of” and sometimes “aggressive femme,” which indicates a feminine style of dress combined with an assertive or outspoken personality. Women who were attracted to feminine-looking women referred to them as “femme,” “feminine,” “pretty,” and “a real lady.” Some middle-class women were reluctant to give themselves a label: they mentioned not liking the labels that exist and not liking the act of labeling someone else’s gender presentation. Everyone who turned in a survey, however, assigned herself a score between one and ten on the scale as a way to measure her own gender presentation.

In one sense, the style of Black femme women is consistent with what researchers have found for other feminine lesbians: they wear dresses or skirts, form-fitting jeans, tops that are low cut or that show cleavage, makeup, jewelry, and accessories such as purses. When going out socially, they take care to wear clothes that show this gender presentation. But even in more casual settings with other lesbians, they wear clothing that lets others know they want to be seen as feminine, such as makeup and high-heeled shoes. The hairstyles of femme women include long and short relaxed or straightened styles; dreadlocked hair, twists, braids and other “natural”-styles; and head wraps made from African-inspired cloths. Femmes with very short hair or bald heads still exude a feminine image by wearing makeup, large earrings, and other markers of femininity. These styles are consistent with the range of fashions seen on other Black women in New York at the turn of the twenty-first century, and represent a link between lesbian style and Black culture. Blackman and Perry (1990), writing about the strong African- and culturally-inspired looks worn by Black lesbians in the late 1980s, say their presentation of self reflects an effort to bring a particular racial and cultural visibility to their lesbian identities in the White-dominated, public lesbian communities of that time. The styles they portrayed represent the tension of belonging to Black as well as gay cultures and a refusal to give up either one.¹²

A feminine gender presentation is not necessarily connected to any specific personality traits or ideologies about gender or gender display. Women who scored between one and three on the gender presentation scale were no more likely to report a personality or interaction style that was laid-back or assertive than were other women. In this sense, they did not conform to stereotypes of feminine women as soft-spoken, submissive, or indirect.

Femmes were the least likely to have entered into a gay sexuality through the pathway I define in Chapter 1 as straight-up gay. They were most likely to be hetero-identified lesbians, having grown up with little or no sense of difference from other Black women; conformists, who experienced same-sex desire in their younger years but did not act on it until much later; or sexually fluid women, who reported ongoing attractions to both men and women. Historically, femme lesbian identity has not been based in strongly internalized feelings of difference, but rather in commitment to a gay life through socializing in the gay world and having intimate and sexual relationships with women. Researchers Kennedy and Davis (1993) and Ponse (1978) found that the gay sexuality of femme women is dictated more by setting and circumstance than by feelings of difference. Harris and Crocker (1997) argued that femme gender presentation is a “sustained gender identity,” or a model of critical reshaped femininity and assertive sexuality that is neither biologically assigned nor a mere representation of costumes and play.

Black feminine women have a presentation of self that is consistent with what scholars of the African American experience have identified as the dual character of African American culture. Black lesbians with a femme gender presentation are less affected than are White lesbians by what Harris and Crocker (1997) term “patriarchially imposed femininity” because historically, femininity has been viewed differently by the dominant society and by African Americans themselves when enacted by Black women. Second-wave feminists saw femininity as oppressive, but Black women may not experience it in the same way, because while the social position of Black women has certainly exposed them to gendered oppression, it has left little room for that oppression to be based in characteristics associated with the type of patriarchy experienced by White women, who are depicted as frail, dainty, submissive, dependent, and weak. These stereotypes have not been consistent with Black women’s self-created, self-imposed femininity.

The femininity achieved by Black women is associated instead with power, independence, and leadership. Historian Shirley Carlson (1992), writing about Black community expectations of Black women during the late Victorian era (around the turn of the twentieth century), describes “Black Victoria” as a woman who simultaneously embraced the social expectations of the larger society and emphasized and performed the different expectations for women that emanated from the Black community. This model of Black femininity stressed virtue and modesty alongside intelligence, outspokenness, race consciousness, and work in the public

domain. Carlson writes: “The ideal Black woman’s domain, then, was both the private and the public spheres. She was wife and mother, but she could also assume other roles, such as schoolteacher, social activist, businesswoman, among others. And she was intelligent” (62). Likewise, Shaw’s (1996) historical account of Black womanhood for the middle class during the Jim Crow era (1880s–1950s) persuasively shows that Black femininity encompassed traditional notions of beauty along with intelligence, independence, and commitment to the uplift of the racial community. Today, Black gay women who are femme apply this historical understanding of the role of women in African American communities as the model from which they develop and interpret their gender presentation and sexuality.

Gender-Blenders

Gender-blender is a style related to, but distinct from, an androgynous presentation of self. Thirty-four percent of the respondents fit into this category. None of them came into a gay sexuality as hetero-identified lesbians or sexually fluid women. Rather, gender-blenders followed the pathways associated with conformists and straight-up gay women. Rather than de-emphasize femininity or masculinity, gender-blenders combine specific aspects of both to create a unique look. They usually wear certain items of men’s clothing, like men’s pants or shoes, combined with something less masculine, like a form-fitting shirt or a little makeup. Sometimes their clothes are not specifically men’s clothes but are tailored, conservative women’s items worn in a less feminine style. Some of the labels used in the community to express this gender presentation style included “soft butch,” “futch” (suggesting a combination of “feminine” and “butch”), “sporty,” “casual,” and “fem-aggressive,” which indicates a combination of feminine and masculine gender display.¹³ Women attracted to gender-blenders referred to them as “soft butch,” “pretty and boyish,” “not too hard looking,” and as women who are “less feminine . . . but who still look like women.”

What struck me most about the women in this category was the creativity with which they presented themselves. They almost never wore skirts or dresses, and yet they never looked completely like boys. While androgynous women are often stereotyped as looking very similar to one another—wearing plaid men’s shirts, buzz cuts or short hair, no makeup, and comfortable shoes or boots—Black gender-blending women encompassed many different styles. Younger gender-blenders who hung

out in the East Village might wear t-shirts underneath button-down men's shirts layered over cargo shorts, with flat 1970s-style Pro-Keds sneakers, in a look similar to that worn by male skateboarders. Gender-blenders from Brooklyn might pair brightly colored dashiki tops with jeans and wear their hair in twists or some other natural style. Or you might see the standard urban uniform of a crisp white t-shirt, baggy blue jeans, fresh white uptown sneakers, and a long ponytail underneath a fitted Yankees baseball cap sported by Puerto Rican gender-blenders from Harlem or the Bronx.

What unites these different fashions as a group is that the style is specifically nonfeminine. The clothes are worn in a loose-fitting masculine presentation, though hips, hair, and breasts signal that the bodies are women's, and the look is softened with lip gloss, eyeliner, or a feminine hairstyle. Because there is so much variation in women's styles of dress, gender-blenders are not necessarily labeled as lesbians in the heterosexual world. In this context, they may appear as straight women who do not dress in an overtly feminine way. It is mainly in lesbian environments that the gendered identity of gender-blenders becomes apparent. Gender-blenders tend to partner with more feminine-looking women.

Transgressives

Eighteen percent of respondents have a non-gender conforming presentation of self. They scored themselves between seven and ten on the gender presentation scale and expressed gender in ways that are considered masculine. The majority would be considered straight-up gay according to the categories in Chapter 1, although a few came into the life as conformists. None are hetero-identified lesbians or sexually fluid women.

Transgressive women usually wear men's shirts, pants, and shoes and coordinate these outfits with heavy jewelry, belts with large, masculine buckles, ties, and suspenders (the use of these items varies with age and sense of fashion). Unlike women with a gender-blender style, their clothes are never form-fitting—a clear way to distinguish between a femme and a transgressive who are both dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt. Their hair might be dreadlocked, braided in a cornrow style that is close to the head, or worn very short and not accompanied by makeup, earrings, or other accessories that would soften the look. In their interviews, transgressive women said they leaned toward being boyish in their clothing and mannerisms. When

asked what label they would use to define themselves, many of them readily identified with a specifically nonfeminine or masculine style, calling themselves “boyish” and saying things like “I was always a tomboy from the time I could remember,” “I dress aggressive—I don’t put on a front for nobody,” and “They would call me a butch. I prefer stud, dom, aggressive.”

Over and over, transgressive women described themselves as dressing in a way that makes them feel “comfortable.” This statement has several meanings. On the one hand, dressing comfortably means wearing casual clothes that allow the body to move freely. On the other hand, dressing comfortably is also associated with feeling good or having a sense of authenticity in their self-expression that is conveyed through their clothing and overall comportment. These women could have chosen larger-sized women’s clothes, such as women’s jeans that have a loose fit but still complement or help construct a feminine silhouette. They could have worn “sensible” women’s shoes. But in seeking out clothes that made them feel comfortable, they specifically and repeatedly chose men’s styles and clothes that were structured to portray a more masculine silhouette. Ro Gaul, for example, a licensed electrician born in Jamaica, West Indies in 1963, gave herself a score of seven on the scale. She is tall and thin, with long dreadlocked hair. She says she does not need a label to define herself, but she “could put on a ball gown and [would] still walk like a boy.” She dresses fashionably in men’s clothes, wearing button-down shirts with a white t-shirt underneath, square-toed men’s boots with an animal print, and a large, masculine belt buckle on her jeans. She has to be proactive in creating this look because her slim build makes it difficult to find men’s clothes that fit her frame.

Ro says that often when she walks down the street, “guys and girls” look at her like she’s “peculiar.” Nevertheless, I have seen African American men come over to Ro and to other gender-blending and transgressive women to compliment them on their sense of style in ways that are not hostile but that suggest admiration. They have said things like, “I just wanna tell you I like the way you put that all together; much respect to you,” “Excuse me, I like those sneakers and the way you hook them up with those shorts. You have a nice style. Where’d you buy those shorts?” or “I just wanted to tell you I like your look, Ma.” The way Black transgressive women present themselves suggests an attempt to incorporate Black social and cultural markers and Black aesthetic style with Black masculinity on their bodies—to display multiple identities while openly

acknowledging their gay identity. The responses of some men suggest they have successfully accomplished this goal.

Researchers writing about non-gender conforming lesbians often argue that transgressive identity is based in internal feelings of difference, masculine inclination, and sexual interest in women consistent with my “straight-up gay” pathway into lesbian sexuality.¹⁴ And indeed, the majority of the transgressive women I studied report having the feelings of internal difference consistent with this pathway. I have defined this gender presentation as “transgressive” because women in this group transgress notions of femininity, because many do not like or use the label “butch,” and because transgressive is linguistically similar to the term *aggressive*, which many Black lesbians in New York use to denote a woman with a masculine gender display.¹⁵ Transgressive women might have been called studs in a previous generation or butch in the predominantly White women’s community, in that they use the female body as the site for signifying masculinity (Halberstam 1998). Most Black lesbians I spoke with were not comfortable calling themselves or the women they desired butch or stud, however. Some did not want to label them at all, while others (mostly working-class women) used “aggressive” to indicate a woman who does not look feminine.

Consider the example of Morgan Banner (born in 1962), a former military officer from Staten Island. When asked, “How do you feel about labels like femme, or aggressive, or butch?” she said: “I hate ‘butch,’ I hate ‘butch.’ I don’t mind ‘aggressive,’ and I don’t mind ‘femme’ because I think those categories fit. I mean people at my job, they don’t know my lifestyle, but they tell me all the time, ‘You’re very aggressive,’ because it is a standpoint you take. I don’t take no shit, I do what I gotta do, and as an aggressive person, I feel like there is nothing I can’t do if I put my mind to it.” When I asked her how she would label herself if she had to choose a label, Morgan replied, “As being very aggressive.” To the question, “What is it about your style of dress or personality that makes you say that?” Morgan responded, “Well, I shop—I wear men’s clothes.” When asked, “Oh, you only wear men’s clothes. Do you shop at men’s stores?” she affirmed, “Only men’s stores.”

While some women identify a masculine style as well as an assertive, dominant personality as components of a transgressive presentation of self, the relationship between physical presentation and interaction style is not at all clear. Many women who report a nonfeminine presentation of self declare they also have an assertive personality, but sheep-

ishly admit that their partners might not agree. Morgan later noted that although she thinks of herself as having an aggressive, dominant personality, her mate calls her “girly” because she has certain emotional responses and other qualities stereotypically associated with femininity: “Sometimes she [partner Shaniqua Banner] teases me and says I’m kind of girly.¹⁶ She says I’m kind of feminine because sometimes I pluck my eyebrows or because of how I used to wear my hair. She says that I’m kindhearted and I’m so soft. . . . In the house I’m one person and outside, she says, ‘You put on a front outside, you try to act all hard and then you are all soft here.’ I mean, I ‘water up’ [cry], I’m sensitive. My eyes tear when I’m real emotional, so she says ‘Oh, that makes you femme. You’re femme.’”

Morgan’s comments juxtapose two images of the transgressive as assertive and masculine, with an undercover sensitive, emotional, and therefore feminine expression as well. Her partner’s comment—“You put on a front outside, you try to act all hard and then you are all soft here”—implies that Morgan’s willingness to show a more vulnerable side of herself only takes place in certain physical locations (“here” meaning inside the home) as well as in private emotional spheres (“here” meaning within the relationship). It suggests that there are limited places where Morgan feels comfortable expressing these types of feelings and implies their association with a traditionally feminine demeanor.

The majority of respondents distinguished between having an aggressive style of dress and a dominant or forceful personality, saying the two are separate. Evangelina Tarcel, a feminine woman, for example, said the following: “I have an aggressive nature, but I love my high heels and my lipstick and my eye makeup and my cleavage showing. But if I see something I like, you’d better believe I am going over there to ask her her name [chuckles].” Transgressive women were no more likely than were femme or gender-blending women to report a very assertive or aggressive interaction style, measured as a score of seven or higher on the personality scale (Appendix B). Traits traditionally thought of as masculine, such as straightforwardness, assertiveness, or being a particularly rational thinker, did not reveal themselves in any consistent way within the three gender display categories. Likewise, gender-blenders and transgressive women often joked about their more feminine partner having the more aggressive sexual appetite, or they admitted wanting not only to give sexual pleasure to their partners but

also to receive it. These sexually aggressive behaviors in the more feminine partner contradict the expectations created by studies of butch-femme relationships in previous generations, which suggested that the more masculine-identified partner had to be the more aggressive pursuer sexually.¹⁷

The three gender display categories contain some overlap. Women who scored a seven out of ten on the physical presentation of gender scale might be considered gender-blenders or transgressives depending on the relationship between their style, the symbols they used to express gender, and their mannerisms. And while in most cases my assessment and my respondents' assessments of their gender display category matched, in 20 percent of the cases I assigned the respondent a category that was different from her self-assignment. This discrepancy was mainly found for middle-class and upper-middle-class lesbians, who, as I explain later in the chapter, were the least likely to report a nonfeminine presentation of self, despite their own responses in the in-depth interviews that suggested otherwise.

My gender display categories are not fixed: women may move further to the left or right on the scale or modify their gender presentation over time as their tastes change. Changes in gender display are not random, however, and gender display does not vary from day to day. When women do shift categories, it is usually for one of four reasons: they have recently come to identify as gay and are negotiating the type of gender display that feels most comfortable, they have moved from one geographic lesbian community to another and adopted new styles or variations consistent with the new locale, they have entered a new relationship and taken on a gender presentation that is oppositional to the new partner's gender display, or they have exited gay communities and taken on a heterosexual (and more feminine) presentation of self.

SEPARATE SPHERES: 1970S LESBIAN-FEMINISM AND BLACK LESBIAN IDENTITY

In the 1970s, the association between lesbian identity and the women's liberation movement became so powerful that lesbian-feminist perspectives on gay identity began to overshadow the experiences of lesbians who were unconnected to that movement, gay women whose lives were primarily being shaped by other events in their social worlds. Most research on that era has not done a good job of documenting whether

and how lesbian-feminist ideologies influenced racial and ethnic minority gay communities of that time, though work by Audre Lorde (1995), Barbara Smith (1983), and Anita Cornwell (1983) offer important exceptions. Nevertheless, we do have some historical accounts of the conflicted feelings shared by Black and White lesbians as they struggled with whether and how Black women would participate in the lesbian-feminist subgroup of the women's liberation movement.¹⁸ These accounts suggest that Black women were never fully indoctrinated into the particular type of feminism espoused by White women during the 1960s and 1970s.

The persistence and meanings of gendered presentations of self among Black gay women offer additional evidence that Black lesbian communities remained largely outside of White lesbian-feminist influence. In their efforts to assimilate into the larger women's movement, 1970s lesbian-feminists took a stance that was disparaging of feminine/masculine gender display among lesbians and encouraged women to move toward androgynous gender presentations in their everyday fashions (Brown 1972). Butch and femme roles were said to have been silenced in all but the toughest lesbian communities, which were most visible in the bar culture (Loulán 1990). As a group, however, Black lesbians were less engaged in the public bar culture that defined many White working-class women's experiences; instead, they primarily socialized with one another at private house parties in their own racially segregated neighborhoods (Thorpe 1996).¹⁹ Furthermore, Black lesbians maintained a physical distance from White lesbian-feminists and had less exposure to the assaults directed at gender presentation in their relationships. Since many Black women were never fully part of White lesbian-feminist leadership or on board with their goals, they were less influenced by these efforts to replace butch and femme identities with androgynous presentations of self.

Anita Cornwell's writings as a Black lesbian-feminist in the early 1970s help to make this point. Cornwell recounts the time when her friend referred to her as a "stud," a term used in Black lesbian communities to denote a lesbian with masculine-identified style and mannerisms. Cornwell was critical of the label, did not like it used to identify her, and was frustrated that her group of friends were relating to other lesbians with that terminology. She credited the persistence of gendered categories to Black women's distance from the feminist movement: "Not surprisingly, fear of encountering racism seems to be one of the main reasons that so many Black womyn [feminist alternative spelling

of woman that removes “man” from the word] refuse to join the Womyn’s Movement. This is especially unfortunate for the Black Lesbians because, unless they have come across Feminist ideas from somewhere, they are apt to remain in the old rut of sexual role-playing that apparently affects all traditional Lesbian circles” (1983, 12). It is clear from Cornwell’s writing that she believed that 1970s Black lesbians were not being sufficiently influenced by lesbian-feminist ideologies toward gender identities, and as a feminist she found this problematic.

I have found very little published research analyzing gender presentation in Black lesbian communities during and after the 1970s women’s movement. Shockley writes more generally about the dearth of scholarship by and about Black lesbians, saying they are not analyzed as literary subjects because White female writers are concerned with making their own voices and experiences heard, because Black female writers give priority to writing about racism, and because those who have written about lesbian themes have had difficulty getting those works published. One major issue for Black women writing about lesbians has been the fear of being identified by other Blacks as “gay, queer, funny, or a bulldagger” (1983, 84). Shockley says these names are “embedded deeply within the overall homophobic attitude of the Black community, a phenomenon stemming from social, religious, and ‘biological’ convictions” (84).

Silvera (1992) reports experiences as a lesbian in Toronto’s Afro-Caribbean communities that are similar to what Shockley found nearly a decade earlier. The harshest, most critical language about Black lesbians was reserved for women with a nonfeminine presentation of self. These women have always been the face of lesbian identity, bearing the brunt of the hostility and misunderstanding for the group. The fear of being stigmatized by one’s own group members can be paralyzing, particularly when those whose opinions matter most, those to whom one feels closest, and those to whom one turns for support and protection from outsiders become one’s harshest critics. Clarke agrees, saying that because Black gay people have always contributed significantly to the well-being of Black communities, “it is exceedingly painful for us to face public denunciation from Black folk—the very group who should be championing our liberation” (1983, 207). The double transgression of acting on same-sex desires and defying societal norms of femininity has rarely been publicly acknowledged or analyzed in research on Black lesbians, perhaps in an effort to protect Black women from having their behaviors categorized as deviant or nonnormative.

Historically, raced notions of women's sexuality, morality, temperament, beauty, and behavior have portrayed Black womanhood as the inferior "other" relative to the normative status of White womanhood.²⁰ Cahn's (1994) argument that racially polarized axes have historically imparted greater masculinity to Black women athletes based on their work history as slaves, sharecroppers, domestics, and laborers also explains the reluctance of researchers to consider the significance of gendered categories among Black sexual minorities. Some fear that racist ideology will be validated and used to marginalize and debase the behaviors and experiences that Black women record. Even in the broader context of lesbian identity and experience, where gendered presentations of self exist among women of all racial groups, there is a fear that calling attention to and analyzing the experience of Black gay women will result in their actions being interpreted as opposed or inferior to those of White lesbians.

USES OF GENDERED CATEGORIES IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK LESBIAN LIFE

Elizabeth Bennett, a gender-blender, shared how her gender display has changed over time. She thinks lesbians develop a gender presentation after spending time in lesbian social settings. She says that when one first comes into the life, "You're just 'being gay,' you don't realize how the community is." In the newness of spending time in gay social circles, what she noticed first were the masculine-identified women: "You might think that everybody looks like a boy and you're the only one who looks like a girl. But then you see that some people look like girls, some people look like boys, and some people are in the middle. So you will pick something that you are comfortable with."²¹

Elizabeth said that when she first came out, she wore feminine clothes to lesbian bars and nightclubs because that is how she used to dress for social occasions in the heterosexual world. With a feminine gender display, however, she attracted mostly nonfeminine women. Because she wanted to attract feminine-looking women, she learned to change her clothing and adopt a more masculine style: "Feminine girls are usually not attracted to other feminine girls, so you've got to be a little more aggressive-looking to get the feminine girls." Elizabeth said she also found the gender-blending style to more closely reflect the way she feels inside. She is heterosexually divorced but says that even when she was married to her ex-husband she never had a very feminine style. Pictures she shared with

me from a photo album of her married life support this recollection. She concludes that participating in the Black lesbian social world gave her the freedom to “be herself,” as she put it, by dressing in a nonfeminine way. It also rewarded her with the attention of feminine women, who found her gender display desirable.

During the period of my research, it was very unusual to see both lesbians in a Black couple dress in a masculine style. Indeed, in the eight years I have spent studying Black lesbian groups, I have not consciously come across a Black couple in which both partners have a strong nonfeminine gender display.²² As Trina Adams commented, “In most relationships there is one that is more feminine than the other. For some reason that is just the way it is. I’ve never seen two aggressives together. I’ve seen two feminine woman living together, but one is always more aggressive.” Sometimes, both partners in a relationship have a feminine presentation of self—often when one is just entering into a gay identity and still developing her own sense of style, when one or both partners do not want people to know they are involved in a lesbian relationship, or when one or both partners claim a bisexual identity and are not committed to being perceived as a lesbian.²³

Black lesbians in New York use gender display to organize social interactions. In order to attract a person with a certain gendered style, one must possess a complementary gender display. While the structure imposed by these norms maintains order in the community, it also grants women the sexual agency and freedom to present themselves in a gendered way if they so desire; this differs from the expectations in many lesbian-feminist social circles that encourage lesbians to present in ways that are not overtly feminine or masculine. In Black lesbian environments, lesbians feel liberated by the categories of gender display—especially the gender-blender identity—because the categories allow them to express nonfeminine gendered selves in ways that are valued by other gay women. Kennedy and Davis (1993) argue that gender complementarity in lesbian couples of the 1940s and 1950s both imitated and transformed heterosexual relationships. They imitated heterosexual patterns because they were structured around gender polarity, with femininity representing the object of desire. They transformed heterosexual patterns in that they were rooted in the similarity of two female bodies and did not conform to society’s dominant gendered pattern of men being the dominant receiver of pleasure.²⁴ Instead, masculine-identified women were primarily the givers of sexual pleasure. I find Kennedy and Davis’s analysis relevant to contemporary presentations of gender in Black lesbian

relationships. While Black lesbian culture draws on heterosexual models, it also transforms them in specifically lesbian interactions that define and affirm women's sexual desire and embody women's sexual autonomy.

I have seen transgressive women spend an inordinate amount of time selecting just the right men's shirt or blazer or having a jacket tailored to fit their bodies in a specific way while still retaining the clothing's masculine look. These experiences call up images of Kennedy and Davis's 1950s butch women dressing to go out to the bars in Buffalo. Styles that appear tough or cool among certain groups, however, can also draw negative responses when they become associated with a particular classed stereotype of Black masculinity. Black women's sense of sexuality is structured as much by raced cultural norms as by lesbian standards, and the types of clothing that femmes, gender-blenders, and transgressives choose represent definitions of femininity and masculinity that become raced when racial/ethnic women participate in them. When Black lesbians take on non-gender conforming presentations of self, then, they not only visually affirm their sexual freedom, but in the process run the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about Black women's sexuality. They subject themselves to dangerous confrontations with a larger society that devalues any raced expression of sexuality and particularly denounces and denigrates images of masculinity in Black women. Transgressive presentations of self also reify stereotypes of Black women as mannish and are particularly threatening to the male possession of masculinity. Many nongender conforming women face hostility from conformists in mainstream society—and from middle-class Black lesbians as well.

SOCIAL CLASS AND RACIALIZED NOTIONS OF GENDER

There are important differences by socioeconomic status in how lesbians relate these categories of gender presentation to their own lives. While middle- and upper-middle-class women in this study also chose femme and gender-blending displays, they did not self-identify as transgressive, they were less likely to acknowledge the types of pairings that exist between feminine and nonfeminine women, and they were reluctant to support a transgressive gender presentation in other lesbians.

Consider the perspective of Josephine Owens (b. 1963), an attorney. She defines her style as "pretty casual," saying, "I wouldn't call myself really feminine." She does not like to wear makeup or dresses, says she has never carried a pocketbook, and shows other signs that suggest a gender-blender sense of style. When I asked Josephine how she feels

about labels like femme or butch, she gave a long pause, then said: “I don’t like people to label folks—I mean, people are who they are. Unfortunately we do [label] everything, but I don’t like the labels at all. People are who they are, and that’s just it. As long as they’re nice and decent people, that’s all that really matters to me.” When I asked if she would be able to choose a label for herself, she had difficulty answering the question. “For myself?” she asked, and I responded, “For yourself. Where would you fit in if you had to choose a label, or is it that you just don’t think any of them apply to you?” Josephine paused, then asked in a defensive tone, “What are the labels?” “Well, I don’t know,” I said, “There are all of these different ways to—” “Yeah, I don’t think—” she interrupted, “I wouldn’t want to be labeled anything. I wouldn’t want to, I couldn’t choose one for myself.”

Josephine’s partner of ten years is Marissa Dillard, who has a very feminine gender display. The day we met Marissa wore a black and white form-fitting wrap dress, red lipstick, and long curly hair. Earlier in the interview, I had asked Josephine about the types of women she was attracted to when she was single and if there were particular characteristics, such as race, education, style of dress, or other such things, that she looked for in a partner. She said: “I guess the way she looked. I mean, education really doesn’t matter to me. It was the way she looked. I liked a more, I guess I should say I don’t like the ‘butchy’ kind. I like the feminine, semi-feminine kind of woman. So, it’s more of the way she looked. The way she dressed, I mean, I’m not a great dresser myself, so that doesn’t really matter.” Josephine was able to think of labels when describing the type of gender display she was attracted to, but she became defensive when I asked her to label her own gender presentation. While she admitted that she would not refer to herself as particularly feminine, she avoided having to name her own nonfeminine gender display, actively resisting a construction of herself as falling outside of mainstream gender ideologies.

American Studies professor Chad Heap, writing about sexuality and race in 1930s Harlem and Chicago, provides an important historical analysis of class differences in African American attitudes about gender presentation and the open and public display of homosexuality. He notes:

Many middle-class blacks shunned the highly gendered performances of the mannish woman and the fairy—or, the “bulldagger” and the “faggot,” as these two types were more commonly known in black urban culture—by refashioning themselves as normatively gendered homosexuals, whose con-

servative comportment and public discretion won them a level of respect and toleration among their heterosexual peers. But among the working-class blacks of Harlem and Bronzeville, the earlier sexual framework of marginalized fairies and mannish women continued to predominate, as was easily seen when such women and men interacted with prospective sexual partners on the streets and in the queer resorts of the cities' black entertainment districts (2009, 260).²⁵

Josephine's response is also consistent with Crawley's (2001) analysis of Black and White middle-class lesbians as tending to have assimilationist attitudes toward gender presentation. I would argue that working-class lesbians are more likely than more advantaged women to perform their resistance to societal norms through nonconforming gender presentation. They see this resistance as a representation of a sense of difference they have always felt. Many Black, highly educated lesbians are reluctant to claim labels or membership in categories that are marked in the larger society as deviant or are perceived in a negative way. Some Black feminist scholars have argued that Black women, in an effort to retaliate against the pathological image of Black women's sexuality, have historically promoted a public silence about sexuality and proper morality.²⁶ In this sense, cultural stereotypes of Black women as hypersexual inhibit lesbians' freedom of gender expression and disrupt the image of respectability that middle-class women have been able to achieve through high-status occupations and home ownership. As Black women, many feel they have to work hard to be accepted in mainstream society, and a nonfeminine gender display would mark them as "other" by confirming pejorative conceptualizations of "the Black bulldagger" and other stereotypes of Black lesbian sexuality.

Sociologist Karyn Lacy (2007), who studied identity construction among middle- and upper-middle-class heterosexual Blacks, argues that members of this group work hard at making their middle-class status known by erecting symbolic boundaries that signify and sustain a Black middle-class identity to other Blacks, to middle-class Whites, and to the larger society. She says that the middle-class draw on moral boundaries to reinforce and strengthen their already confident hold on a higher social standing (11). I find that in Black lesbian social spaces middle-class lesbians differentiate themselves from less advantaged women by enacting boundaries around clothing and style, creating hierarchies of respectability through social class distinctions.

Black middle-class lesbians were the harshest critics of transgressive gender presentation. They were the least likely to report a transgressive

gender presentation, even when their clothing, jewelry, and other markers of style were consistent with a nonfeminine display. At parties, middle-class women said that lesbians wearing athletic jerseys, do-rags on their heads, or baseball caps lowered the quality or status of events, and often reacted negatively to women wearing these types of fashions. Flyers announcing the latest party tried to discourage this style of dress by including the warning, “No caps, do-rags, or athletic wear: Dress to impress.” As part of my data collection, I hosted a weekly party for women of color at a lounge in Greenwich Village. A few of the women who attended each week wore athletic jerseys and fitted caps. Other than their style of dress, they did not stand out or behave in ways that were different from the other guests. Each time, however, a few patrons would invariably complain that I had “let those type of people” into the party. They would say things like “They bring the party down” and “We work so hard to get away from them, only to have them turn up at a classy event like this one.” The harshest critics were usually middle-class gender-blending lesbians who wanted to be distinguished from more working-class or urban expressions of Black masculinity.

DANGERS OF REPRESENTING BLACK MASCULINITY

When transgressive lesbians appropriate certain representations of masculinity owned by Black and Latino men, they portray images that are raced, classed, and stereotypically associated with violence and menace.²⁷ Some lesbians resent this presentation of self in other women because it is associated with an image of men who are disrespectful to women. Others seek to distance themselves from a style that signifies identification with lower-class life. But many women are attracted to this type of masculinity on a female body, finding the image of a “hip-hop bad boy” alluring or cool when modified and transplanted on a woman.

There are dangers, however, in representing masculinity, particularly through the female form. Transgressive women are rebelling against strong conventional norms. Their emphasis on self-expression and resistance to gender conformity attacks the core of male dominance and invites openly punitive responses from others. But more than that, a non-feminine gender presentation in women may cause men to question the meaning of their own masculinity. Lexington (Lex), a thirty-nine-year-old, working-class straight-up gay woman, said that on an almost daily basis she and other non gender-conforming women are discriminated

against and denied their basic human rights: “People call us out [of] our names, threaten us, all because of who we are and what we look like, what we represent.” When I asked Lex why she thinks men respond to her and other transgressives in such a negative way, she paused, then said, “Because they’ve spent their whole lives with one idea of who they are, and then they look at us with our men’s shirts, our men’s shoes, and realize *gender is something that is taught*” (emphasis in original).

That Black transgressives consistently partner with women who are more feminine and whose style is consistent with heterosexual standards of beauty also endangers the relationships and expectations that go along with male ownership of masculinity. Heap argues that historically, the uncertain economic circumstances of Black men caused them to perceive the visibility of masculine-identified women in Black neighborhoods as a direct threat to their manhood. He says these women “presumably had the power to undermine black men’s strongest remaining claims to masculinity—their sexual prowess and ability to pleasure women. As a result, while black popular culture portrayed faggots as abnormal but relatively harmless buffoons, it generally presented mannish women as dangerous interlopers” (2009, 262). Lex says that lesbians are threatening to men. She explains: “We are a threat to them because we are not supposed to be able to get what they have. Not just aggressives, but other [lesbian] women out there, too. How dare we own our own homes, have cars, raise families, and pull a woman that looks as good as theirs!” Lex sees transgressive women as contesting male hegemony by pursuing masculine status at the expense of heterosexual men.

Race has important consequences for female masculinity. White masculinity in butch women—women whose gender presentation is reminiscent of rockers, motorcycle riders, and the like—gives them an outsider status relative to traditional notions of White femininity and White respectability.²⁸ The masculinity portrayed by Black women, however, is particularly feared in society and tends to be associated with violence, so transgressive women become problematized and feared by others because of the masculinity they portray. This raced and classed gender nonconformity can be dangerous for the women who appropriate it: Black masculinity is disproportionately punished in American society,²⁹ and the enactment of dress and mannerisms consistent with Black male masculinity can lead to police harassment, distrust from strangers, and alienation from the Black middle class. In this sense, transgressives bear the cross of Black lesbian sexuality. Transgressive

women keep Black lesbian sexuality and women's sexual autonomy visible to the larger society by their continuous presence in the Black community. Theirs is an act of resistance not just to dominant societal expectations of gender conformity but also to feminist ideologies who call for the suppression of gendered behaviors and mannerisms.

GENDER PRESENTATION AND GENDER IDEOLOGIES

In trying to understand how Black lesbians negotiate the organization and meanings of gender display, I find that it is desire, not lesbian feminism or a particular politics, that takes center stage. As we have seen, most of the women I spoke to, when asked if their sexuality was tied to feminism, did not consciously link the two.³⁰ Some women have a masculine presentation of self, are primarily attracted to feminine women, and also hold feminist beliefs about eradicating gender inequality. There are also transgressive, gender-blender, and femme women who would like their partners to take on some of the more stereotypically female or male roles in relationships.

The lesbians I studied make a distinction, moreover, between styles or mannerisms that represent masculinity and the gendered privileges and dominance that men tend to benefit from. That transgressives and gender-blenders appreciate and emulate a masculine way of dressing does not preclude them from experiencing the world as women in a society where men still have economic, social, and other advantages. Men are granted greater status and authority because society continues to privilege male leadership of important societal institutions and awards men an earnings advantage. Gender-blending and transgressive lesbians do not benefit from these gendered structural advantages, so relationships organized around gender display do not provide a gendered economic benefit for the less feminine partner. Transgressives also do not view their nonfeminine state as a higher or more powerful status relative to other women. They do not, to borrow Crawley's language, "pursue status at the expense of more feminine women" (2001, 192), nor do they perceive their gender nonconformity as carrying greater authority than the gendered femininity portrayed by femme Black women in lesbian communities.

Black femininity, when represented in particularly middle-class ways, represents authority and power. Black social environments value feminine women who are assertive, educated, and economically independent.

Kennedy and Davis (1993) found that in Black lesbian communities, femmes often took on leadership roles by desegregating predominantly White bars and by organizing house parties, the primary arena of Black lesbian social life.

In the past, butch-femme roles eroticized and structured sexual interactions around the principle of gender difference. In the twenty-first century, however, gender presentation has come to be defined more broadly and is no longer primarily a means of structuring sexual interactions. Nevertheless, it does continue to structure membership in and organization of lesbian social worlds, and it continues to be a visible expression of a distinctive lesbian eroticism. The majority of Black lesbian women I have met take pains to present a particular type of gender display when they participate in lesbian social life because they are looking to create a particular aesthetic self, and the norms of the community require consistency in gender presentation. The structure imposed by community social norms becomes problematic when it impedes a person's freedom to partner with someone who has the "wrong" gender display. It also liberates lesbians, however, by allowing them a sense of freedom in their ability to express their sexuality in a way that is feminine or nonfeminine.

Black lesbians use boundaries to create complementarity in gender presentation, to show social class distinctions, and to communicate status. At parties, nightclubs, and other public settings, many middle- and upper-middle-class lesbians communicate their status position by avoiding transgressive gender presentations and clothing associated with urban hip-hop styles. Some also criticize or refuse to directly acknowledge the gender categories constructed by the community, even as they participate in them.

UNDERSTANDING THE PERSISTENCE OF GENDER PRESENTATION IN BLACK COMMUNITY LIFE

Black lesbians who regularly participate in Black gay spaces have carefully maintained and modified the culture of lesbian gender presentation, with its class and geographic distinctions, as a form of sexual and personal expression for at least four reasons. First, historically, Black lesbians as a group have been less influenced by lesbian feminist ideologies that discourage or stigmatize gender categories. From the 1960s onward, Black women have been less likely than White women to interpret the

expression of a gendered self as the most important component of their oppression as women. Consequently, Black women have been less likely to view the elimination of a gendered self as a requirement for their own liberation. This stands in contrast to feminist arguments that call for the suppression of gender differences as a strategy for achieving gender equality.

Second, gender complementarity also continues to structure lesbian relationships because it helps define the erotic “other.” An important part of gay sexuality is the pursuit of same-sex desire, and many find that clothing and mannerisms help create an attraction through a sense of difference within the context of two women’s bodies. Gender presentation serves to maintain lesbian identity as a *sexual* identity, and the eroticism engendered by complementary gender display makes visible the expression of women’s sexuality. Lesbians feel empowered when they are able to move away from societal constructions of gender. Gender-blenders and transgressive women liberate themselves from the constraints of hegemonic femininity by drawing from other sources to create a sense of self. Third, gender presentation style helps to create and perpetuate identity and cultural expression for Black lesbians. Mahon (2004) writes about the links between music and style in nontraditionally Black cultural spaces in which the authenticity of Black culture is expressed through music, clothing, and style; these are also important means by which to express other identity categories. Ralph Ellison, in a collection of essays first published in 1964, wrote about the complexities of Black identity and the public presentation of the Black body to communicate meaning and portray a sense of self: “We recognized and were proud of our group’s own style wherever we discerned it—in jazzmen and prize fighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing. Indeed, in all those nuances of expression and attitude which reveal a culture. We did not fully understand the cost of that style but we recognized within it an affirmation of life beyond all question of our difficulties as Negroes” (Ellison, 1964, 54). In Black lesbian communities, gender presentation is simultaneously an articulation of African American expressive culture and lesbian group membership. It fuses Black and lesbian cultures to create and express a distinctive cultural identity.

Finally, Black lesbian community norms police behavior and encourage conformity to group expectations of identity representation. The gender displays that are portrayed by femme, gender-blender, and transgressive lesbians, and the complementarity that is produced in Black lesbian couples, make the categories they represent particularly visible

markers of sexual freedom as well as group affiliation. Gender presentation is used by communities to create social space, identification categories in gay and lesbian settings, and sexual selves. The distinctions made in gender presentation and in class and cultural portrayals of gender presentation have as their foundation and require for their existence *interaction* within a social system, which in this case is Black lesbian social space.³¹ The integration of these spaces by lesbians who do not adhere to the meanings of gender presentation Black women have created would change the social organization of these environments.